

# ARTS

## Mixing business with pleasure

Robin Wight on the importance of corporate support for the arts

Ten days ago you could have been kidnapped (with your consent) by the radical theatre group Blast Theory and held for 48 hours while the world looked on via live Internet coverage. The most interesting aspect of this event is not whether it was art or bad taste, it's that the event was sponsored by a *business* (the clothing manufacturer Firetrap), after the Arts Council turned it down.

At a time when all of us concerned about the arts have been reading a copy of Sir Richard Eyre's elegantly written report on lyric theatres in London, the business sponsorship of Blast Theory starts to provide a quite different perspective on some of the central issues raised by the debate on the funding of the arts.

Business support doesn't take a leading role in Sir Richard Eyre's otherwise fascinating analysis of the issues confronting lyric theatre (opera and ballet) in London. Yet business support for the arts last year was at an all-time high. While government funding of the arts (in terms of the grant to the Arts Council) has in real terms been reduced by £13 million since 1992, business support for the arts has grown by £28 million.

Last year, in fact, businesses coughed up £95 million for the arts, which is already half as much as the entire sum the Arts Council itself dispenses every year. And businesses themselves could do even more if the highly successful Pairing Scheme which uses public money to give incentives to new private sponsors was expanded (it's the most cost-effective money going into the arts: for every £1 coming from the government, businesses provide another £2.20).

If business could be persuaded to do more, the Treasury would be mightily relieved (though it's worth noting that, as businesses can set sponsorship against tax, even business support for the arts is not without cost to taxpayers).

That businesses do so much for the arts is due both to the growing professionalism of many arts organisations and to an organisation called Absa (Association for Business Sponsorship of the Arts) of which I recently became chairman (I can therefore claim little credit for its achievements). Absa's chief executive, Colin Tweedy, invented the Pairing Scheme in 1984. Proportionally, the latest data shows that British businesses have now overtaken American businesses in their corporate support for the arts.

For all this success, the evidence suggests that British business involvement with the arts is very thinly rooted. Only two of the top ten sponsors of a decade ago (BT and Marks and Spencer) are still among the top ten sponsors today. And the reason for this is not a little to do with why Sir Richard

Eyre's call for more taxpayers' money for opera and ballet in London may well, unhappily, fall on deaf ears.

Art is not popular. It should be, but it isn't. Stephen Fry captured part of the problem very well, speaking at the launch of Absa's Creative Forum in 1997: 'I'm here to use a very embarrassing word, a word that no one ever likes to hear, and that word is "art". It is a word that always embarrasses the English whose national emotion, of course, is embarrassment. We are secretly very proud of the fact that we're rather artistically rich, but we're very embarrassed about what art might be.'

Messrs Blair and Mandelson's focus groups will reveal no latent discontent that is likely to enable Sir Richard to get his money. Rather the reverse: the 'posh art syndrome', triggered by the tactless handling of the award of Lottery money to purchase the Churchill Papers and to rebuild the Royal Opera House (desirable though both measures were), set back the cause for arts in Britain by many years.

There's a vicious circle here. As the arts are not a popular recipient of taxpayers' money the Royal Opera House is continuously underfunded by government, like the rest of the arts. So the Royal Opera House is forced to exploit its 'elite status' with its fund-raising skills (which Sir Richard rightly praises) among the business community. This leads to the popular belief that 'opera is a toff's pastime' which in turn

leads to the complaint that 'why should my taxes subsidise a toff's pastime?' QED.

All of which feeds the most damaging perception of all: that art is for the few rather than the many (to coin a phrase). This is a damaging belief that begins in the schools of Britain. Art may be the tool by which we stimulate the imaginations of five-year-olds, but, once we are in long trousers, art is not seen to have an important role inside the community. So we are back to depending on our patrons, be they government or business. In both cases the fundamental difficulty is that their constituencies, taxpayers or shareholders, are not properly persuaded of the value of art to either of them.

The answer, as Sir Richard correctly identifies, is 'Education, education, education'. Part of that must be in schools, but in truth 'education' needs to be directed at business people as well (hopefully the government's life-long learning programme can embrace this too). The lyric theatres themselves could probably do more. Because of the failure to embed art values at school, many business people are intimidated by high art (and it's not helped when high art sits on a high horse preening behind the 'artistic imperatives' to which Sir Richard refers).

The huge opportunity is for the arts to demonstrate to business how the process of art can unlock the creativity of business people. Two small examples: a car dealer in Derbyshire paid for his delivery driver to have opera singing lessons to build his confidence. A management consultancy arranged for their top 100 global partners to script, perform, stage and market an opera from scratch over five days as a giant bonding session. (Along the way it seems quite a few lost their fear of opera.)

Once these enthusiasms are embedded in the business community, the empty seats at London's opera and ballet performances will start to be filled. And this will lead to a wider appreciation of arts in business which will support the provision of the missing funds that the arts needs.

Sir Richard may have scarcely mentioned business in his report (he didn't even credit Absa for the submissions they provided) but, with a little more encouragement from inexpensive ideas like the Pairing Scheme, business could prove to be a more reliable saviour than the Treasury.

So will the government do more to encourage businesses to support the arts? It's a bigger question for the arts world (and the business community) than even the future of the Royal Opera House.

Robin Wight is the new chairman of Absa.



'You don't fool me Constable, get back to work.'